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Insights from China's Territorial and Maritime Disputes*

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The PLA and National Security Decisionmaking: Insights from China's Territorial and Maritime Disputes

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Abstract

A central question in the study of China's foreign policy is the role of the PLA in national security decisionmaking. This paper seeks to illuminate this question by examining one specific issue area, territorial disputes. The role of the PLA in decisionmaking in China's territorial disputes has been limited to bureaucratic influence within existing policymaking structures and processes. With the partial exception of China's interpretation of the rights of coastal states under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, the PLA has not played a significant role influencing the initiation of China's territorial disputes, in the content of these claims or in how China has chosen to defend these claims. Instead, China's behavior in territorial disputes, including its recent assertiveness in the South China Sea and East China Sea, reflects the consensus of China's top party leaders to respond to what are seen as challenges and provocations from other states. Little evidence exists to support the view that the PLA has escalated these disputes against the wishes of top leaders.

A central question in the study of China's foreign policy is the role of the PLA in national security decisionmaking. Many observers have argued that PLA influence at least partly accounts for the more active and assertive posture China adopted following the 2008 global financial crisis. As Joshua Kurlantzick writes, "At times, the PLA appears to have initiated or escalated international disputes—against the wishes of the top leadership in Beijing—in order to push Chinese policy in a more hawkish direction."¹ Kurlantzick captures a sentiment in the media that the influence of the PLA on policymaking in Beijing accounts for China's recent behavior.²

Nevertheless, assessments of the PLA's influence in national security decisionmaking are often based on conjecture or speculation, not facts. This chapter seeks to illuminate this question by examining one specific issue area, territorial disputes. Territorial disputes arguably offer an "easy" test for observing the PLA's influence on decisionmaking. The defense of China's sovereignty and territorial integrity has been one of the PLA's core missions since the founding of the PRC in 1949 (in addition to defense of the CCP's rule). Many of China's uses of force have involved the defense of territorial claims, such as the 1962 war with India.³ As a result, territorial disputes should be one policy arena where the influence of the PLA can be observed and identified.

This chapter argues that the PLA's role in decisionmaking on China's territorial

¹ Joshua Kurlantzick, "After Deng: On China's Transformation," *The Nation*, October 17, 2011.

² See, for example, Christopher Bodeen, "Chinese succession highlights military's role," AP, October 17, 2011 and Jeremy Page, "China's Army Extends Sway," *Wall Street Journal*, October 4, 2010.

³ On China's use of force in territorial disputes, see M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

disputes has been limited to bureaucratic influence within existing policymaking structures and processes. With the partial exception of China's interpretation of the rights of coastal states under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, the PLA has not played a significant role influencing the initiation of China's territorial disputes, in the content of these claims, or in how China has chosen to defend them. Instead, China's behavior in territorial disputes, including its recent assertiveness in the South China Sea and East China Sea, reflects the consensus of China's top party leaders to respond to what are seen as challenges and provocations from other states. In other words, the PLA and China's leaders share the same preferences for a robust but non-militarized defense of China's claims in these disputes. Little evidence exists to support the view that the PLA has escalated these disputes against the wishes of top leaders. As other scholars have argued, the PLA remains subordinate to the party through existing mechanisms of party (or civilian) control.⁴

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, it reviews the challenges that scholars and analysts must confront when seeking to determine the influence of the PLA on national security decisionmaking in China. Second, it examines the general ways in which the PLA might influence China's policies on territorial disputes, including the initiation and content of specific territorial claims as well as China's approach to managing and defending its current claims. Third, to create a baseline for the analysis of recent events, it reviews the PLA's role in China's past territorial disputes. Fourth, it examines the role of

⁴ Dennis Blasko, *The Chinese Army Today: Tradition and Transformation for the 21st Century* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Michael D. Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior—Part Three: The Role of the Military in Foreign Policy," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 34 (Winter 2012); You Ji, "The PLA and Diplomacy: Unraveling myths about the military role in foreign policy making," *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 86 (2013).

the PLA in recent territorial and maritime disputes, including China's interpretation of the rights of coastal states under UNCLOS as well as the conflicts in the South China Sea and East China Sea. Overall, the findings support other recent studies regarding the role of the PLA in national security decisionmaking.⁵

Analytical Challenges

Scholars or analysts who seek to identify the influence of the PLA on policymaking in China must overcome a variety of analytical challenges, including the kinds of influence that the PLA could exercise, the types of policies over which the PLA might exert influence, and the evidentiary basis for determining whether influence has been exercised. Each is discussed below.

The first challenge is to define the concept of influence. What motivates a great deal of concern about the nature and degree of the PLA's influence over policy today is the fear that the PLA might be able to "capture" the state in certain policy domains, which may push China to adopt more "assertive" or "hawkish" policies than it otherwise would have adopted in the absence of pressure from the PLA. Nevertheless, as a key actor within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the PLA could also exert influence through existing institutional or bureaucratic channels, such as the Central Military Commission (CMC) or leading small groups established by the party or the state to coordinate policy.

As a result, it may be useful to identify two types of potential influence over

⁵ Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior—Part Three: The Role of the Military in Foreign Policy; Ji, "The PLA and Diplomacy."

policy. The first draws on traditional conceptions of relational power and could be called *capturing influence*. That is, through lobbying or independent action outside existing bureaucratic channels, the PLA could push the party-state to adopt a specific policy that party leaders do not want and would not have otherwise adopted without pressure or manipulation by the PLA. By definition, such influence would represent an act of disobedience and a violation of party norms. The second type of influence draws on research in bureaucratic politics and could be described as *bureaucratic influence*. That is, the PLA helps shape the content of a given policy through lobbying or independent action. The key difference is that in the bureaucratic view the PLA is only one of many actors that provide input and the final decision is taken by the party-state. Bureaucratic influence would include the PLA's influence over tactical and operational matters, including how specific policies are implemented in the military arena. The potential for this type of PLA influence has increased as the PLA's autonomy with the party system has grown over the past twenty-five years.

A second analytical challenge concerns the types of policies over which the PLA can exert influence. The core concern revolves around whether the PLA is exerting influence beyond its military and defense portfolio to advance parochial interests at the expense of the party-state. At the level of grand strategy, for example, the PLA could seek to influence non-military issues such as the overall guiding principle for Chinese foreign policy beyond the role of the armed forces as reflected in party guidelines.⁶ Similarly, decisions to use force lie beyond the PLA's military domain due to their implications for overall national interests, and would be made by China's top leaders on

⁶ That is, the party determines the overall framework for military strategy.

the Politburo Standing Committee. In a specific foreign policy issue with a military component such as nonproliferation, for example, the PLA could seek to prevent China's accession to key international agreements such as the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.⁷

Taken together, these two challenges require precision about the type of influence being exercised and the issue over which it is being exercised. In the jargon of political science, analysts must clearly and precisely define the “dependent variable.” Determining whether the PLA has actually exercised influence over national security decisionmaking involves an even more difficult analytical challenge: distinguishing between a potential PLA role in *shaping* policy and a PLA role in *implementing* policy. A visible PLA role in implementing China's approach to a particular issue does not necessarily mean that the PLA played an important role in shaping the content of policy. The PLA may simply be carrying out the instructions of the party-state. Likewise, lack of a visible PLA role in China's approach to a particular issue does not necessarily mean that the PLA did not play a role in influencing China's policy on that issue. The PLA may have shaped the policies that were adopted even if does not help implement them. Finally, “aggressive” or “hawkish” behavior is not necessarily evidence of PLA influence on national security policy. China's top leaders might have adopted such policies for other reasons or because they share the PLA's preferences on the issue at hand.

Given this challenge, how should analysts proceed? How do we “know” that the PLA has influenced a particular policy? No simple solutions exist. Nevertheless, the following approach may be useful. First, state clearly and precisely the nature of potential

⁷ At the same time, the PLA does enjoy a great deal of autonomy over military affairs at the operational level. Swaine, “China's Assertive Behavior—Part Three: The Role of the Military in Foreign Policy; Ji, “The PLA and Diplomacy.”

PLA influence and the policy issue affected. Second, bring evidence to bear that demonstrates the PLA role in the formulation of policy. If the data permits, direct evidence is better than circumstantial evidence. The consistency of policy decisions with known or assumed PLA preferences is not direct evidence of PLA policy influence. Third, consider carefully alternative explanations. If China might have had strong reasons to adopt a particular policy that can be attributed to other factors, then this suggests that the influence of the PLA was not high and, at a minimum, that the PLA did not capture the party-state's position on this particular policy.

Pathways of PLA Influence in Territorial and Maritime Disputes

How might the PLA influence China's policies in its territorial and maritime disputes?

The PLA could influence China's policies in territorial and maritime disputes in three different ways. First, the PLA could push for China to initiate a new claim to a piece of territory. Second, as the initiation of disputes is relatively infrequent, the PLA could push for China to alter the scope or content of an existing claim. That is, the PLA could push the state to claim additional land in an existing dispute or additional rights within a maritime jurisdiction. Both types of influence would reflect instances where the PLA would be moving beyond the military domain to change national policy.

Third, in an existing dispute, the PLA could push for a change in China's strategy for managing its claims. In general, a state can pursue three generic strategies for managing its territorial claims.⁸ First, it can pursue a strategy of cooperation, which excludes threats or uses of force and involves an offer to either transfer control of contested land or drop existing claims to territory. Second, a state can pursue a strategy of escalation, engaging in coercive diplomacy to achieve a favorable outcome at the negotiating table or using force to seize contested land. Finally, a state can adopt a delaying strategy, which involves maintaining a state's claim to a piece of land but neither offering concessions or using force. Given these strategies, the PLA could influence China's policies in its territorial disputes in several ways. The PLA could seek

⁸ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*.

to prevent China from pursuing a strategy of cooperation and offering compromises or territorial concessions to another state in an existing dispute. The PLA could push for threats or uses of force in an existing dispute. Finally, when a delaying strategy is being pursued, the PLA could lobby for demonstrations or exercises of sovereignty, such as a more aggressive patrolling posture.

The PLA in Past Territorial Disputes

A review of the PLA's role in shaping China's policies in territorial disputes demonstrates that its influence has been limited and mostly bureaucratic in nature.

Since 1949, China has participated in twenty-three territorial disputes and six maritime rights disputes. Although many of these disputes trace their origins to the Qing Dynasty, most of the disputes arose for the PRC in the early 1950s during the process of consolidating China's boundaries after the end of the civil war. No evidence exists that the PLA played a prominent role in the decisions to initiate these territorial claims. Similarly, no evidence exists that the PLA played a role in the PRC's first claim to the Senkakus, which was issued in December 1970. (As discussed below, evidence does exist to suggest that the PLA has played a role in shaping China's interpretation of the rights of coastal states and foreign military activities in the EEZ under UNCLOS.)

Since 1949, China has offered territorial concessions twenty-five times in seventeen of its disputes. No evidence exists that the PLA blocked or limited any of these

compromises.⁹ Anecdotal evidence suggests that the PLA delayed compromise in the boundary negotiations with Vietnam in the 1990s by refusing to participate in the joint working group created to negotiate with Vietnam. The PLA reportedly objected to offering concessions to a country with which it fought an embarrassing and costly war in 1979. Nevertheless, when Jiang Zemin announced in 1997 that land border negotiation would be completed by 1999, the PLA was either unable or unwilling to block this agreement.¹⁰

Since 1949, China has used force sixteen times in six of its territorial disputes. Consistent with the CCP chain of command, most decisions to use force were made by top party leaders, not by senior PLA officers in opposition to the instructions or intent of the party. Nevertheless, the PLA appeared to play a prominent and leading role in the decision to use force in three disputes. The first concerns a brief clash with India in September and October 1967 at two different mountain passes along the line of actual control, Nathu La and Cho La.¹¹ The clash occurred amid competition between China and India to consolidate their positions at the passes and resulted in PLA troops firing on Indian soldiers erecting a barbed wire fence. During three days of fighting, thirty-six Indian and an unknown number of Chinese soldiers were killed. The account of the clash by the commander of the Tibetan Military District, Wang Chenghan, suggests that it had

⁹ It is possible that the party may not have offered compromises in the first place because of potential opposition from the PLA. Nevertheless, the large number of compromises that were actually made suggests this is unlikely.

¹⁰ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 148.

¹¹ Wang Chenghan [王诚汉], *Memoirs of Wang Chenghan* [王诚汉回忆录], (Beijing: Liberation Army Press [解放军出版社], 2004), 482; P. B. Sinha and A. A. Athale, *History of the Conflict with China* (New Delhi: History Division, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, [restricted], 1992), xxiv; G. S. Bajpai, *China's Shadow over Sikkim: The Politics of Intimidation* (New Delhi: Lancer Publishers, 1999), 156-195.

not been authorized by the CMC, much less top party leaders.¹² As a result, the PLA's actions in the clash had the potential to capture China's policy in the dispute with India. Nevertheless, senior party leaders acted quickly to prevent further hostilities.

A second case involves a significant PLA role in the 1988 decision to occupy some of the land features China claimed in the South China Sea. Amid growing tensions in the South China Sea, including the occupation of features by Vietnam and other claimants, the PLAN in cooperation with the State Oceanographic Administration submitted a plan calling for the occupation of nine vacant features in the South China Sea.¹³ This represents a form of bureaucratic influence, as the PLA submitted a plan for entry into the Spratlys that was vetted and approved by both the CMC and state organs. In the clash itself, the local commander reportedly opened fire without receiving permission from the General Staff Department, violating China's guideline for the engagement to "not fire the first shot."¹⁴

In a third case, the PLA may have played a central role in the occupation of Mischief Reef in late 1994. Although the occupation was consistent with the 1988 plan (to seize vacant features), the action may not have been authorized and may have been undertaken independently by the Guangzhou military region in collaboration with the South Sea Fleet.¹⁵

¹² Wang Chenghan, *Memoirs*, 481-482.

¹³ Liu Huaqing [刘华清], *Memoirs of Liu Huaqing* [刘华清回忆录] (Beijing: Liberation Army Press [解放军出版社], 2004), 534-535; Xu Ge [徐舸], "Steel Anchors Consolidating Maritime Frontiers: Record of the Republic's Naval Battles" [铁锚固海疆: 共和国海战史记], (Beijing: Tide Press [海潮出版社], 1999), 308-325.

¹⁴ Xu Ge, *Steel Anchors Consolidating Maritime Frontiers*, 312; Lu Ning, *The Dynamics of Foreign-Policy Decisionmaking in China* (Boulder: Westview, 1997), 126.

¹⁵ Greg Austin, *China's Ocean Frontier: International Law, Military Force, and National*

At the same time, evidence exists that party leaders have overruled the PLA on several occasions. The first concerns General Su Yu's ambitious plan as Chief of the General Staff to seize all the offshore islands off the coast of Fujian and Zhejiang that remained under Nationalist control in the 1950s. Mao's opposition to Su Yu's plan was likely one factor that resulted in his demotion and transfer to the Academy of Military Science in 1958.¹⁶ Su Yu's plan was never implemented. A second example occurred after the first few clashes between Chinese and Indian troops on the China-India border in August and October 1959. Front-line commanders repeatedly sought permission to attack Indian positions, which Beijing refused. A third example occurred during the clash with Vietnam over Johnson Reef in March 1988. After the clash, the CMC denied a request from the local commander to assault other features under Vietnamese control.¹⁷

Why has the PLA played such a limited role? The short and over-simplified answer is the structure of civil-military relations, namely, that the PLA is a party-army under the leadership of the CCP and not a national army supervised by the state. The PLA, most of the time, conducts operations within procedures established by the party and in support of the party's objectives, not the PLA's own goals.¹⁸

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Development (Canberra: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 91; Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 296-297.

¹⁶ Su Yu's Biography [粟裕传], ed. Zhu Ying [朱楹] (Beijing: Modern China Press [当代中国出版社], 2000), p. xxx.

¹⁷ Lu Ning, *The Dynamics of Foreign-Policy Decisionmaking in China*, 126.

¹⁸ On party control of the army, see, for example, David Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's Military: Progress, Problems, and Prospects* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2002).

Similarly, the role of the PLA in China's territorial disputes over the past few years suggests limited, largely bureaucratic influence. Consistent with bureaucratic influence, the PLA appears to have played a role in the evolution of China's interpretation of provisions of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). In the summer of 2010, the PLA appeared to capture China's policy regarding China's objection to U.S. naval exercises in the Yellow Sea with the carrier *George Washington*. Nevertheless, little evidence exists to support the assertion that the PLA influenced strategic decisions in China's policies toward the disputes in the various disputes in the South China Sea and East China Sea. Instead, China's more assertive policies can largely be explained in terms of the interactive nature of these disputes, which are prone to spirals of instability.

Maritime Jurisdiction and the Interpretation of Coastal States Rights in the EEZ

Although China signed and later ratified UNCLOS, Beijing has adopted domestic legislation and policy positions that challenge some of its provisions. In particular, China seeks to limit foreign military activities in waters that it claims in two ways. First, China asserts that foreign military ships must request prior permission for "innocent passage" in China's territorial seas (that is, within waters 12nm from its coast). By contrast, article 17 of UNCLOS states that all ships "enjoy the right of innocent passage" without prior permission. Although UNCLOS does prohibit military activities in the territorial seas such as weapons exercises and intelligence gathering, it does not prohibit the movement

of military vessels. China's requirement of prior permission is contained both in its 1992 law on territorial seas and in a note submitted with its instrument of ratification in 1996.

Second, China opposes military activities in its 200nm EEZ for two different reasons. China views all military-related surveys as "marine scientific research" over which a state can claim jurisdiction in its EEZ. As a result, China opposes intelligence-gathering activities by foreign countries in these waters, which has resulted in the 2001 *Bodwitch* and 2009 *Impeccable* confrontations.¹⁹ China has also challenged the freedom of navigation by military vessels within the EEZ as being inconsistent with "peaceful purposes" provisions in UNCLOS (88, 141, 301). This relies on a broad interpretation of these articles, which are typically interpreted as referring to aggressive actions outlined by the UN Charter, not intelligence activity, exercises or other non-aggressive actions.²⁰

What role did the PLA play in the evolution of these positions held by China? Although a definitive answer remains elusive, the UNCLOS negotiating record provides one clue and suggests that the PLA's role in China's desire to restrict innocent passage in the territorial seas was limited. During the negotiations over UNCLOS in the 1970s, China expressed concerns about the scope of innocent passage and argued that only non-military vessels could enjoy this right.²¹ Efforts to include language regarding prior notification failed to receive a majority vote, but it was a position that China actively supported. At this time, China's stance was probably informed by its traditional

¹⁹ Raul Pedrozo, "Close Encounters at Sea: The USNS *Impeccable* Incident," *Naval War College Review* 61, No. 3 (2009): 101-111.

²⁰ Erik Franckx, "American and Chinese Views on Navigational Rights of Warships," *Chinese Journal of International Law* 10, no. 1 (2011): 187-206.

²¹ For an excellent review of China's role in the drafting of UNCLOS, see Zhiguo Gao, "China and the Law of the Sea," in *Freedom of seas, passage rights and the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention*, eds. Myron H. Nordquist, Tommy Thong Bee Koh and John Norton Moore (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 2009).

conception of national sovereignty when applied in the maritime domain and not the specific views of the PLA. In fact, it is unclear if the PLA even participated in the Chinese negotiating team or would have been able to exert much influence over it.

The PLA has probably played a greater role in China's positions on military activities in its EEZ. The PLA's position on these issues appears to have been formed by the mid-1990s, when it was raised in the talks that resulted in the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement with the United States that was signed in January 1998.²² At this time, Chinese international legal scholars did not raise the issue of restrictions on military activities in the EEZ in their own analysis of China's 1998 EEZ law.²³ This gap between the public writings of China's legal scholars and the positions of the PLA in defense talks with the United States suggests that, in a manner consistent with bureaucratic influence, the PLA helped to shape China's position on the rights of coastal states in the EEZ.

To be sure, the PLA has actively sought to enforce its interpretation of state's rights in the EEZ. In 2001, the PLA sought to enforce its interpretation of the limitations on foreign military activities, first when a PLAN frigate challenged and threatened the USNS *Bowditch* in the Yellow Sea in March 2001 and then when a PLAN aviation fighter collided with a U.S. EP-3 flying 70 miles south-southwest of Hainan. Similar challenges occurred in 2002 and in several times in 2009. Analysis of the 2001 incidents suggest that there was little if any coordination between the PLA and either the state or the top party leaders, suggesting that the PLA may have been trying to shape the content of China's policy on this issue by how it implemented the policy of intercepting

²² Interview.

²³ See Zou Keyuan, "China's Exclusive Economic Zone and Continental Shelf: Developments, Problems, and Prospects," *Marine Policy* 25, no. 1 (2001): 71-81.

surveillance flights.²⁴ In 2004 and 2005, PLA scholars detailed China's position in *Marine Policy*, an important international journal on maritime affairs.²⁵ These military scholars were the first to offer detailed arguments in support of the interpretation that the PLA had been implementing, again suggesting a degree of PLA influence over the evolving content of China's interpretation of the rights of coastal states in the EEZ. The role of the PLA in the 2009 *Impeccable* incident is consistent with bureaucratic influence. According to You Ji, the plan to confront the USNS survey ship was approved by both the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group and the CMC, indicating coordination between key party and military bodies.²⁶ The actual confrontation involved fishermen, boats from two civil maritime law enforcement agencies, and the PLAN, again consistent with high-level coordination including the military and a number of state agencies. Given the military focus of the *Impeccable*'s activities, it is likely that the PLA raised the issue within China's policymaking process in a way consistent with bureaucratic influence, just as PLAN lawyers helped to shape China's overall position on the EEZ. Nevertheless, it was not an unauthorized operation taken without knowledge of key party leaders.

Perhaps the clearest example of the PLA influencing national security policy in territorial and maritime disputes concerns China's objections to U.S. and Korean naval

²⁴ At the same time, there was significant regional variation in the pattern by which China intercepted U.S. surveillance flights. The pattern of intercepts was most aggressive in the south, where the EP-3 incident occurred, suggesting that there was not necessarily coordination within the PLA, either. A similar dynamic occurred in 2014, when one particular unit again adopted particularly aggressive intercepts of U.S. surveillance flights near Hainan. Audrey McAvoy, "PACAF commander: Despite intercepts, most East China Sea encounters safe," Associated Press, October 9, 2014

²⁵ Ren Xiaofeng and Cheng Xizhong, "A Chinese Perspective," *Marine Policy* 29, no. 2 (2005): 139-146.

²⁶ Ji, "The PLA and Diplomacy," 16. On the incident, see Pedrozo, "Close Encounters at Sea."

exercises in the Yellow Sea in the summer of 2010. Although the exercises were designed to signal American resolve to deter North Korea following the sinking of the South Korean ship, the *Cheonan*, China viewed them as threatening because of their proximity to China.²⁷ China did not oppose the exercises when they were first announced, but changed its policy in response to pressure from public opinion, which was shaped partly by military academic commentators, and by comments that Deputy Chief of Staff General Ma Xiaotian made in a television interview.

The PLA's influence in this case is demonstrated by reviewing the chain of events. On June 8, 2010, *Huanqiu Shibao* (Global Times), published a report from the South Korean Yonhap News Agency about upcoming U.S.-South Korean exercises in the Yellow Sea. In the report, *Huanqiu Shibao* interviewed several Chinese military commentators, who described the exercises as provocative. The report did not state where in the Yellow Sea the exercises would occur. On the same day, *Huanqiu Shibao* published an editorial that stated “emotionally, the Chinese people cannot accept the presence of the U.S. aircraft carrier in the Yellow Sea.”²⁸ The first Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) comment on the exercises, also on June 8, was to call “for calmness and restraint from all parties concerned to avoid further escalation of tension.”²⁹ In other

²⁷ On this episode, see also Alastair Iain Johnston, “Stability and Instability in Sino-US Relations: A Response to Yan Xuetong’s Superficial Friendship Theory,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 4, no. 1 (2011): 5-29.

²⁸ “Expert: U.S. nuclear aircraft carrier conducting exercises with Korean military in the Yellow Sea is inevitable” [专家：美核航母开进黄海于韩军军演已不可避免], *Global Times* [环球时报], June 8, 2010; “South Korea should not take U.S. aircraft carrier into the Yellow Sea” [社评：韩国休把美航母带入黄海], *Global Times* [环球时报], June 8, 2010;

²⁹ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang’s Regular Press Conference on June 8, 2010,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China.

words, China had not yet formulated a position toward the exercises.

The following day, June 9, attention to the exercises in the Chinese media increased. *Huanqiu Shibao* published the results of an online poll from its website, in which more than 96 percent of respondents agreed that the exercises “pose a threat to China.”³⁰ In the weeks that followed, the story spread and additional military commentators like retired Major General Luo Yuan began to weigh in, expressing opposition to the exercise. On June 22, 2010, the MFA issued a second statement on potential U.S. exercises in the Yellow Sea. Again, the statement indicated that China had not yet formed a clear position. According to Qin Gang, “We are very concerned about the relevant report and are following the development closely....relevant parties should stay calm, exercise restraint and refrain from doing things that could aggravate tension and harm the interest of nations in the region.”³¹

Amid the growing media attention, a statement by PLA Deputy Chief of Staff Ma Xiaotian helped harden China’s position. In what appeared to be an impromptu interview in the lobby of a hotel or office building, Ma answered a few questions from a Phoenix Television reporter.³² In particular, Ma asserted that China was not merely “concerned” about the exercises, but “extremely opposed” (*feichang fandui*) to them because they were “close to Chinese territorial waters.”³³ Ma’s statement appeared to catalyze a

³⁰“Angered over U.S. aircraft carriers entering the Yellow Sea, Chinese netizens’ image of Korea is worrying” [引美航母入黄海激怒中国网友韩国形象堪忧], *Global Times Online* [环球网], June 9, 2010.

³¹ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang’s Regular Press Conference on June 22, 2010,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China.

³² In the interview, Ma was wearing a business suit and not his military uniform.

³³ For the text and video of Ma’s interview, see http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/detail_2010_07/01/1702694_0.shtml.

change in China's declaratory position. On July 6, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang stated, "We have taken note of the remarks of Deputy Chief of General Staff Ma Xiaotian. We will follow closely the situation and make further statements accordingly."³⁴ Two days later, Qin Gang used much stronger language that appeared to endorse the position articulated by General Ma. He stated that China "resolutely opposed" (*jianjue fandui*) the presence of "foreign ships" in the Yellow Sea and "other coastal waters [*jinhai*]" that would influence "China's security interests."³⁵ Thus, in approximately one month, China's position evolved from a "call for calmness and restraint" to "resolute opposition." This shift can be attributed to the PLA in the context of a more liberal media environment. A combination of public attention generated by China's unofficial media, along with commentary on the issue by retired military officers and statements by senior generals, pushed the MFA to adopt increasingly strong language and, ultimately, opposition to the exercises.³⁶

To the degree that the PLA did capture China's policy on this issue, it did not last for long. In November 2010, the United States announced that it would conduct another exercise in the Yellow Sea with an aircraft carrier. The MFA responded quickly to

³⁴ "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang's Regular Press Conference on July 6, 2010," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, July 7, 2010. For an explicit assertion, based on information provided by unnamed diplomats, that "[P]olitical pressure from the military community forced the central government to change the text of its official statements several times in the past two months to harden its tone over the US-South Korean joint naval drill near its territorial waters," see Cary Huang, "PLA ramped up China's stand on US-Korea drill," *South China Morning Post*, August 6, 2010.

³⁵ "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang's regular press conference on July 8, 2010," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China.

³⁶ At the same time, this chronology indicates that statements by military commentators alone were insufficient as a factor in the change in the MFA's articulation of China's position.

register China's objections. However, its statement backtracked from the language used in July 2010 in two ways. First, it stated only "opposition" to the exercises, dropping "resolute" and "extreme" as modifiers of China's position. Second, it referred only to China's EEZ and not its "coastal waters," thereby framing its objection within the UNCLOS framework. This left open the possibility that the exercise might be confined to South Korea's EEZ, which does not overlap with China's entirely in this area.

In sum, China has exercised largely bureaucratic influence regarding China's position on maritime jurisdiction, which reflects instances of the PLA influencing the content of China's territorial or maritime claims. The PLA did capture policy during the summer of 2010 regarding China's position on U.S. naval exercises in the Yellow Sea, appearing to compel the MFA to change its articulation of China's position. However, this change in China's position was revised only a few months later, limiting the PLA's influence.

The South China Sea

Since 2006, and especially from 2009, China has adopted a more active and assertive approach to managing its claims to contested islands and disputed maritime rights in the South China Sea.³⁷ Nevertheless, in the South China Sea, China has relied principally on diplomatic and political tools to advance its claims, not military ones. China has not used its naval forces to seize contested features or nor has it used them directly to threaten or use force against the naval forces of other claimant states. Instead,

³⁷ For a review of China's actions in these disputes since 2006, see M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Strategy in the South China Sea," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3 (December 2011).

they have been used indirectly, largely through general displays of presence to signal resolve. The possibility remains, however, that the PLA advocated for a hardening of the policy and an emphasis on consolidating China's claim, but given the issues at stake and the dynamics of the disputes, China's leaders likely shared the PLA's preferences on the issue.

In the past few years, China has taken a range of actions to strengthen its claims the various disputes over sovereignty and maritime rights in the South China Sea. Diplomatically, China has sought to actively defend its claims when challenged by others. Between 2006 and 2008, Chinese diplomats challenged the legality of foreign-invested hydrocarbon exploration and development projects in Vietnam in waters where China claimed maritime rights. In May 2009, China submitted a note along with a map of the infamous "nine-dashed line" (*jiu duan xian*) to the UN after Vietnam and Malaysia formally expanded their claims to maritime rights by asserting extended continental shelf rights in the South China Sea, especially in waters around the disputed islands and coral reefs. Politically, China used the activities of civil maritime law enforcement agencies to demonstrate and exercise its sovereignty in these waters. Starting in 2008, the South Sea regional fisheries administration bureau began to increase its presence in these waters. In 2009, it detained an unprecedented number of Vietnamese boats and fishermen. At the same time, vessels from the State Oceanic Administration's China Marine Surveillance Force (*haijian budui*) began to increase its presence around the Spratlys. In the first half of 2011, it began to openly challenge seismic surveys conducted by the Philippines and Vietnam, cutting the towed cables of a Vietnamese ship in late May 2011.³⁸

³⁸ This paragraph draws on Fravel, "China's Strategy in the South China Sea."

In the South China Sea, however, the PLA has played a secondary role and not a primary one. As the brief review of China's actions above demonstrates, China has not sought to actively defend its claim through use of its armed forces, especially the PLAN. Instead, the PLA has played a secondary role, namely, to underscore China's ability to defend its claims by force, if necessary. China has done so through a series of large-scale military exercises, especially in 2010. In March 2010, the North Sea Fleet conducted a long-distance exercise with a task force of six ships, including one destroyer, three frigates, a tanker, and a salvage vessel. The task force traveled from Qingdao through the Miyako Strait and then turned south, passing through the Bashi Channel between Taiwan and the Philippines before stopping at Fiery Cross Reef in the South China Sea.³⁹ According to the deputy commander of the North Sea Fleet, one purpose of the exercise was "to protect its maritime territorial integrity through long-distance naval projection."⁴⁰ In July 2010, the South Sea Fleet organized a large-scale live-ammunition exercise held at an undisclosed (though likely undisputed) location in the South China Sea that involved China's most advanced vessels from all three fleets. Although the exercise was held to promote the "transformation in military training" and the operational concept of "a system of systems operations," Chief of the General Staff Chen Bingde also noted the broader context in which it occurred at the time: "we should pay a high degree of attention to developments and changes in situations and tasks [to] carry out preparations for military struggle."⁴¹ In November 2010, the South Sea Fleet organized an amphibious

³⁹ "Chinese navy's new strategy in action," *Strategic Comments* 16 (May 2010); Greg Torode, "Exercises Show PLA Navy's Strength," *South China Morning Post*, April 18, 2010.

⁴⁰ Quoted in "Chinese navy's new strategy in action."

⁴¹ "Grasp Generating Systems Operations, Actively Promote the Transformation in

landing exercise named *Jiaolong-2010* involving more than 1,800 marines, which was observed by more than 200 foreign military officers.⁴² More recently, continuing this trend, the PLAN conducted highly publicized cruises and exercises in the South China Sea in 2013 and in 2014. In both instances, vessels stopped at James Shoal in the southernmost reaches of the South China Sea near Malaysia, publicizing on state media oath-swearing ceremonies to defend Chinese territory.⁴³ Similarly, in December 2013, the *Liaoning* aircraft carrier conducted its first long-range training exercise when traveled from its homeport in Qingdao to the Yulin naval base on Hainan Island adjacent to the South China Sea. Although the carrier stayed relatively close the Chinese coast and avoided disputed waters, its presence nevertheless sent another general signal of China's resolve to defend its claims.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, China has not sought to use its growing naval power to compel other states to accede to its demands, to enforce its sovereignty claims directly, or to seize contested features.

The secondary role of the PLA was underscored by the standoff over Scarborough Shoal in April 2012. According to one mainland publication, the decision to dispatch maritime law enforcement vessels to protect the Chinese fishermen found by the

Military Training” [着眼生成体系作战能力，积极推进军事训练转变], *PLA Daily* [解放军报], July 29, 2010.

⁴² “South Sea Fleet Organizes ‘Jiaolong-2010’ Live Fire Exercise” [南海舰队组织‘蛟龙—2010’实兵实弹演习], *PLA Daily* [解放军报], November 4, 2010.

⁴³ Bai Ruixue, Gao Yi, and Gan Jun [白瑞雪、高毅、甘俊], “From South China Sea to West Pacific: Complete Record of Navy Task Force’s Distant Sea Training of Combat-Readiness Patrol” [从南海到西太平洋:海军编队战备巡逻远海训练全记录], *Xinhua* [新华], April 3, 2013.

⁴⁴ For a detailed discussion of the carrier’s 2013 exercise, see Andrew Erickson and Phillip C. Saunders, “Selective Transparency: How the PLA uses Development, Testing, Deployment, and Exercises as Shaping and Signaling Tools,” (unpublished paper, December 2013)..

Philippines inside the shoal was made within civilian channels by the MFA. When the incident occurred, Chinese fishermen used their satellite phones to send a distress signal, which was received by vessels from China Marine Surveillance, a maritime law enforcement body under the State Oceanic Administration (and now part of the newly established China Coast Guard). The incident was then reported to the MFA via the SOA's headquarters in Beijing. Following a decision by China's top leaders, a command post was established within the China Marine Surveillance force, whose ships were instructed to aid the Chinese fishermen in the shoal.⁴⁵ Although the PLA and CMS reportedly have a close working relationship, focused primarily on information-sharing and limited joint training, Chinese sources indicate that the initial decision in the crisis were made by civilian leaders and not military ones. In addition, Chinese naval vessels were never deployed in close proximity to the shoal as part of an effort to limit the potential for escalation. Noted Chinese military historian Xu Yan describes this as "Naval forces on the second line, coast guard forces on the first line" (*haijun erxian, haijing yixian*) or placing naval vessels over the horizon in an "overwatch" position.⁴⁶ Similarly, when China deployed the HD-981 deep water semi-submersible drilling rig to the Paracel Islands in May 2014, China deployed some naval vessels nearby in addition to much larger numbers of China Coast Guard vessels.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Han Yong and Guan Xiangdong [韩永, 关向东], "Standoff over Huang Yan Island" [对峙黄岩岛], *China Newsweek* [中国新闻周刊], no. 16 (May 2012): 28

⁴⁶ Xu Yan [徐焰], "Several Decades of Chinese-Philippine Wrangling in the South Sea" [中菲南海争执几十年], *Study Times* [学习时报], May 21, 2012.

⁴⁷ According to a Vietnamese source, China in early June had deployed "6 warships, 40 coast guard ships, more than 30 transport ships and tugboats, and 34-40 fishing boats." See "Chinese vessels try to scare Vietnam's ships further away from illegal rig," *TuoitreNews*, June 9, 2014.

In the Scarborough standoff, top military leaders indicated their support for the government's approach. In an impromptu television interview, a Phoenix TV reporter tried to interview General Ma Xiaotian in early June 2012 at a conference on cyber security in Beijing.⁴⁸ In particular, Ma said: "The question you ask is very sensitive. We have the ability to defend our waters, but at the moment we have still not prepared to use military force to go defend [our waters]. If we were to do so, it would be as a last resort. Now we are still conducting bilateral talks, using diplomatic means and some civilian [i.e., law enforcement] means to resolve the conflict. This way is the best."⁴⁹ Ma's statement countered rumors that Chinese forces in the Guangzhou Military Region had been placed on alert (indicating preparations to use force) and highlighted the consensus between party and military elites.⁵⁰ Earlier, in May 2012, Defense Minister Liang Guanglie also underscored the importance of a diplomatic solution to the standoff in a meeting in late May with his Philippine counterpart Voltaire Gazmin. Although PLA-affiliated media commentators such as retired general Luo Yuan have called for China to adopt a more forceful response, active-duty general officers such as Ma Xiaotian and Liang Guanglie have not.

Even though the PLA has not played a more active role in China's assertiveness in the South China Sea in the past few years, the possibility remains that China adopted this approach in response to PLA pressure that outside analysts cannot observe.

⁴⁸ This draws on M. Taylor Fravel, "The PLA and the South China Sea," *The Diplomat*, June 17, 2012.

⁴⁹ For the video, see http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/special/nanhaizhengduan/content-3/detail_2012_05/28/14866227_0.shtml

⁵⁰ On the rumors, see Andrew Chubb, "Xinhua spreading rumours, unpopular military commentary, and a witchhunt: the Scarborough Shoal media wave Part III (May 11-13)," *South China Sea Conversations* (blog), May 21, 2012.

Nevertheless, this is unlikely for two reasons. Although PLA-affiliated commentators write frequently on the issue, they often seem to write in reaction to events. This suggests that they are responding to developments, not driving decisionmaking. In any case, whether commentators such as Luo Yuan speak for the PLA as a whole remains unclear and is unlikely.⁵¹ More importantly, however, China's assertiveness in these disputes can be explained as a reaction to the efforts by other claimants to strengthen and bolster their own claims. In other words, PLA influence over decisionmaking is not necessary to explain the policies and positions that China's government and party leaders would have adopted anyway. From Beijing's perspective, it has faced many challenges to its claims in the past few years. These challenges, not PLA pressure, offer a superior explanation for China's assertiveness, as one can clearly link China's policies to the actions of other states. China's detention of Vietnamese fishermen in 2009, for example, occurred as the number of Vietnamese fishing around the Paracels increased dramatically. Likewise, China's efforts to interfere with seismic surveys being conducted by Vietnam and the Philippines in the first half of 2011 were a response to the launch of new survey activities by both countries. Finally, the standoff at Scarborough occurred when the Philippines distributed photos of its armed soldiers inspecting Chinese fishing boats within the shoal.

Evidence from key authoritative Chinese newspapers suggests little divergence between the PLA and the party in the South China Sea disputes. Figure 1 plots the number of articles per year in the People's Daily (the CCP's main newspaper) and the PLA Daily (the PLA's main newspaper) with the word "Spratlys" (*nansha*) in the title.

⁵¹ In addition, as Johnston notes, a substantial diversity of opinion exists among the PLA's academic commentators. Johnston, "Stability and Instability in Sino-US Relations," 43-45.

As Figure 1 shows, a strong correlation exists between articles on the Spratlys in both the *PLA Daily* and the *People's Daily*. Although the *PLA Daily* consistently publishes more articles on the Spratlys, many of these reflect “soft” coverage emphasizing the hardship and contributions of the troops who are garrisoned on the seven features that occupies.

One area where the PLA has almost certainly exerted influence concerns China's refusal to clarify the meaning of the nine-dashed line. Although the line has been used on Chinese maps since before the founding of the PRC, the Chinese government has never clarified its meaning. The importance of clarifying the line increased after China submitted a map with the line to the UN in May 2009. Whether the line indicates a claim to the enclosed land features in a manner consistent with international law or whether it indicates other types of rights, such as historic rights or even sovereignty, is an important issue that shapes the perceptions and responses of other claimants in these disputes. At least some in the PLA believe that the line represents historic rights or a traditional form of sovereignty, views that would be inconsistent with UNCLOS. The *PLA Daily* openly referred to the line as China's “traditional maritime boundary” (*chuantong haijiang xian*).⁵² This phrase has appeared ten times in this paper, including eight times in 2009 and 2011. By contrast, the *People's Daily* has never used this language to describe China's claims in the South China Sea. Thus, the PLA may be exerting a form of bureaucratic influence that prevents China from issuing a definition of the line that is inconsistent with what appears to be the PLA's definition (or at least the definition of some in the PLA). Other relevant actors, including the Bureau of Fisheries

⁵²“The Navy's Seventh Escort Task Force Enters the Motherland's Traditional Maritime Boundary” [海军第七批护航编队驶入祖国传统海疆线], *PLA Daily* [解放军报], May 3, 2011.

Administration and the State Oceanographic Administration, appear to maintain similar historic definitions of the line, indicating that China may prefer ambiguity for a variety of reasons and not just in response to pressure from the PLA.

The East China Sea

The East China Sea involves several disputes between China and Japan over the sovereignty of the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands and over maritime jurisdiction in the East China Sea. China also contests Japan's claim to maritime rights from Okintorishima in the Western Pacific, but does not claim sovereignty over the atoll itself. Although this dispute was largely dormant for much of the past two decades, it has become a focal point of tension between China and Japan since 2010.

Before September 2010, China had pursued a largely passive approach to the dispute over the Senkakus. Indeed, China sought to minimize attention to the dispute. As shown in Figure 2, the dispute was rarely discussed in articles in either the *People's Daily* or the *PLA Daily* until the crisis with Japan in 2012. Typically, an article would appear simply noting that China had restated its claim in response to some event involving the disputed islands or in response to a Japanese claim. In the mid-2000s, China began to play a more active role in limiting the potential for escalation in the dispute by preventing Chinese activists from sailing to the islands from ports on the mainland and detaining "baodiao" activists during the 2005 protests against Japan.⁵³

⁵³ M. Taylor Fravel, "Explaining Stability in the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Dispute," in *Getting the Triangle Straight: Managing China-Japan-US Relations*, eds. Gerald Curtis, Ryosei Kokubun and Jisi Wang (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010). For a

During this period, the PLA played no visible role in the dispute over the Senkakus. Almost no public reports exist of PLAN vessels approaching the 12nm territorial waters around the islands or even the broader 24nm contiguous zone. Similarly, PLAAF reconnaissance flights that approach Japan's ADIZ in the East China Sea usually occur several hundred kilometers from the islands themselves.⁵⁴ The PLA has played a direct role, as the transit of PLAN ships through the Japanese islands to the Western Pacific casts a shadow of China's growing military power over the dispute. Nevertheless, PLA forces were not used to threaten Japan explicitly in the dispute over the Senkakus, much less coerce or compel a change in Japan's policy.

On a few occasions, the PLAN appears to have played a more visible role in the dispute over maritime rights in the East China Sea. In January 2005, a single *Sovremenny* destroyer from the East Sea Fleet was spotted in the waters around the disputed gas field. In September 2005, a five-ship task force including a *Sovremenny* destroyer was again spotted in these waters.⁵⁵ These actions occurred during the peak of the dispute over the gas field and were probably intended to signal China's resolve to defend its claim to the field (which lies on the Chinese side of the median line that Japan claims as its EEZ) in response to challenges from Japan that China was stealing oil. However, no evidence exists that the PLA pursued these deployments to influence China's policy. Instead, they appear to have been designed to bolster China's existing policy and to resist pressure from Japan.

detailed account of the protests, see Jessica Chen Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China's Foreign Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁵⁴ See maps in Japan's annual *Defense of Japan* reports.

⁵⁵ James C. Bussert, "Oil May Be Focal Point of Sino-Japanese Dispute," *Signal* (November 2006).

Likewise, little evidence exists to suggest that China's harsh response to Japan's detention of a Chinese fishing boat and its crew in September 2010 reflected PLA influence over government policy. The crisis began on September 7th, when a Chinese fishing vessel entered the territorial seas around the Senkaku Islands, refused instructions to halt, and rammed a Japanese Coast Guard vessel. Although Japan released the crew and the ship on September 13th, it continued to hold the captain and considered prosecuting him under Japanese criminal law. China reacted swiftly. China summoned the Japanese ambassador at least once a day, often in the middle of the night, from September 8 to September 11. China also postponed negotiations over the East China Sea (September 11), cancelled a slew of high-level visits (September 13), detained four Japanese nationals for entering a military restricted area in Shijiazhuang (September 20), and slowed the shipment of rare earth metals (September 24).⁵⁶

Can PLA influence explain China's forceful response? Probably not. The government's response was likely consistent with the PLA's own preferences, namely, the unconditional return of the captain. However the speed with which the government reacted, and the policies it adopted, suggests that the PLA could not have influenced the policymaking process. Instead, Chinese actions can be explained in terms of what was seen as a change in Japanese policy (of subjecting Chinese citizens detained around the islands to criminal prosecution), an issue that perhaps was especially salient because it occurred just before 69th anniversary of the Mukden Incident. Under these conditions, the government probably sought to preempt domestic criticism of failing to defend China's interests, perhaps including from the PLA, for failing to protect a Chinese citizen

⁵⁶ James J. Przystup, "Japan-China Relations: Troubled Waters," *Comparative Connections* 12, no. 3 (October 2010).

detained by Japan. In contrast to the discussion about the Yellow Sea in June 2010, military commentators such as Luo Yuan, Dai Xu, and others were completely silent during this period. They did not author any articles nor did they apparently give any interviews, at least according to one database of Chinese newspaper articles. Likewise, the blogs and webpages for Luo Yuan and Dai Xu do not include any articles authored or posted in September 2010.⁵⁷

Following the September 2010 crisis, tensions spiked again in 2012 after the Japanese government purchased three of the islands from a private Japanese citizen. The purchase was intended to prevent a deterioration in China-Japan relations, as the right-wing governor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara, had launched a public bid to buy these three island and justified his efforts in terms of what he viewed as the inability of the national government to defend them. China's reaction to the purchase was rapid and severe: Beijing issued territorial baselines around the islands to demarcate China's territorial waters and then dispatched vessels from the China Marine Surveillance force to "patrol" these waters, directly challenging Japan's claims to sovereignty over the islands. Nationwide protests were permitted on the 15th, 16th, and 18th of September, while foreign ministry officials used exceptionally undiplomatic language to describe the purchase as an "atomic bomb."⁵⁸ Since then, China has conducted more than ninety patrols within the 12 nautical mile territorial waters of the islands, always using vessels from civilian agencies, first the China Marine Surveillance force and, after June 2013, the newly established China Coast Guard.

⁵⁷ Based on a survey of their known blogs.

⁵⁸ "Remarks by Assistant Foreign Minister Le Yucheng at Symposium Marking the 40th Anniversary of The Normalization of Relations Between China and Japan," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, September 28, 2012.

It is of course possible that the PLA pushed hard for a strong and powerful response to the Japanese purchase. Nevertheless, China's top civilian leaders likely shared the same preferences as the PLA. Following Ishihara's public bid in April 2012, the prospect of the purchase had become a diplomatic issue being waged in full view of the public. Moreover, it involved a dispute over sovereignty with Japan, a country with whom China has had repeatedly strained ties since the end of the Cold War. The purchase itself occurred shortly after Hu Jintao personally requested that Noda halt the sale. Finally, it occurred on the eve of a delicate moment in Chinese politics on the eve of the 18th Party Congress when a significant leadership change would occur, a moment that would heighten China's sensitivity to external threats.⁵⁹

In the crisis itself, the PLA did not appear to be pushing for an even more assertive policy. As shown in Figure 2, the number of articles on the Diaoyu Islands in *PLA Daily* was almost identical to those in *People's Daily*, indicating the high-level of attention throughout the party-state. In addition, articles in *PLA Daily* did not endorse positions beyond those expressed by top party leaders. For example, on September 12, *PLA Daily* published a signed opinion by piece by noted commentator retired general Luo Yuan entitled "China Will Absolutely Not Concede over Territorial Sovereignty."⁶⁰ However, the content mirrored closely themes from the MFA statement. Perhaps the most noteworthy piece in *PLA Daily* warned Japan "not to play with fire," but was written by a civilian analyst and remained consistent with China's objective of deterring Japan from

⁵⁹ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*.

⁶⁰ Luo Yuan [罗援], "China Will Never Concede Half a Step over Territory and Sovereignty" [中国在领土主权问题上绝不会退让半步], *PLA Daily* [解放军报], September 12, 2012.

taking further steps to consolidate its position.⁶¹ More recently, statements by a leading general gained attention when Lt. Gen Qi Jianguo stated in August 2013 that “The Diaoyu Islands are within the range of [China’s] core interests.”⁶² However, his language mirrored almost to the word a statement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in April 2013, which marked the first time that the ministry or any other top government body had suggested that the islands were a core interest.⁶³

Overall, military forces have played a secondary role in China’s response to the purchase. China has not dispatched any military vessels into the territorial waters around the disputed islands. In October 2012, a PLAN task force returning to China from the Western Pacific entered through the contiguous zone between in waters between Yonagunijima and Iriomotejima islands approximately 150 kilometers south of the Senkaku Islands.⁶⁴ That same month, eleven vessels from the PLAN, China Marine Surveillance force and Fisheries Law Enforcement Command conducted a “rights defense” (*weiquan*) joint exercise in the East China Sea near Shanghai.⁶⁵ In particular, the exercise simulated how naval vessels would aid and protect Chinese government ships that clashed with patrols from another country, clearly seeking to deter challenges to

⁶¹ Yang Xiyu [杨希雨], “The Japanese Government Should Not Play with Fire” [日本政府不要玩火], *PLA Daily* [解放军报], September 11, 2012.

⁶² Faith Acquino, “Chinese military scholar claims the Senkakus as a ‘core interest’,” *Japan Daily Press*, August 20, 2013

⁶³ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on April 26, 2013,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China.

⁶⁴ “Chinese warships move away from Senkakus, but tensions remain,” *Asahi Shimbun*, October 17, 2012.

⁶⁵ “Chinese Navy, Marine Surveillance Fisheries Administration Holds Joint Exercise in the East Sea” [中国海军与海监、渔政在东海举行联合演], *International Online* [国际在线].

China's patrols around the islands.⁶⁶

What has garnered the most attention, however, was an incident in January 2013 involving a PLAN frigate and JMSDF destroyer in waters roughly 100 km off the disputed islands. According to Japanese press reports, the Chinese vessel "painted" the Japanese ship with its fire-control radar, which could have been interpreted as the first-step in an attack.⁶⁷ Needless to say, the incident reflects the potential for tactical or operational military considerations to escalate a much broader political dispute. The PLA denies that the incident occurred and it did not occur again, suggesting that it was either not part of China's policy in the dispute or that the PLA was overruled by top party leaders.

Finally, the PLA played a direct role in the decision to establish an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea in November 2013. In this case, the initiative for the policy came from within the PLA, but it was not implemented until approved by China's top leaders. As Shinji Yamaguchi has shown, elements within the PLA first began to propose the establishment of ADIZ in 2008 and 2009. However, the proposal was not approved until after Xi Jinping became general secretary and favored a more proactive foreign policy in its immediate periphery.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ "Content of the rights defense exercise in East Sea on the 19th: Marine Surveillance Boat Collision, China Escort Ship Provide Aid" [19日东海维权演习内容: 海监船遭碰撞 中国护卫舰支援], *New Capital Report* [新京报], October 19, 2012.

⁶⁷ "China's use of fire-control radar ramps up tension in East China Sea," *Asahi Shimbun* February 6, 2013.

⁶⁸ Shinji Yamaguchi, "The Foreign Policy of Xi Jinping's Administration and The Establishment of China's Air Defense Identification Zone," NIDS Briefing Memo, September 2014.

Conclusion

The role of the PLA in national security decisionmaking is one of the most important and most challenging aspects of Chinese foreign policy to study. In the past few years, analysts and observers have speculated that the PLA has sought to push China to adopt more assertive or hawkish foreign policies that China's top leaders would otherwise not have pursued. This chapter examined the PLA's role in China's behavior in its territorial disputes, an issue where the PLA can seek influence as a security issue and an issue where China has been more assertive in the pursuit of its claims since the mid-2000s.

The available evidence does not suggest that the PLA has "captured" national policy in this arena. Instead, the PLA has exercised more limited bureaucratic influence in line with existing national policies. The PLA has not pushed for China to initiate new territorial claims nor to expand the content of its existing claims, with exception of the interpretation of certain aspects of UNCLOS. The PLA has not blocked China's past compromises in territorial disputes, including those throughout the 1990s and in the early 2000s. To the degree that more assertive postures have been adopted in specific disputes, these postures reflect the shared preferences of the PLA and China's top leaders.

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